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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MP BIO: ALEMI BALKHI

**¶11.** (U) This is the first in a series of biographic reporting cables on Afghanistan's newly elected Parliamentarians. Additional reports will be sent as PolOffs continue to meet personally with new MPs during the coming weeks.

**¶12.** (U) SUMMARY: The striking feature of PolOff's December 31 meeting with MP Alemi Balkhi was its uncharacteristic efficiency. Despite his traditional appearance, Balkhi presented himself as a modern intellectual with progressive proposals for organizing Parliament, balancing the Parliament and the Karzai government, and reminding MPs of their responsibilities to constituents back home. The fact that he explained his proposals in less than 45 minutes before sending his guests home must be seen as a testament to Balkhi's clarity of thought, especially in this atmosphere of lengthy political rhetoric. The owner and publisher of a newspaper in Kabul, Balkhi made a political name for himself as Qanooni's running mate in the 2004 Presidential election. It will be interesting to see how his mullah-cum-intellectual ideology plays out in Parliament. END SUMMARY.

ATMOSPHERICS

**¶13.** (U) MP Alemi Balkhi requested an introductory meeting with PolOffs on December 31 to share his thoughts on the progress of the new Parliament and to welcome USG officials in his cold but bustling office just down the street from the National Assembly building. Appearing in his small reception room in a black turban, tan cape, and tinted glasses, together with his salt-and-pepper beard and impressive rings on both hands, Balkhi initially gave the impression of being a traditional Shi'a mullah with expensive tastes. As his initial nervousness melted into quiet conversation, however, it quickly became clear that Balkhi had clear ideas about the modernization and strengthening of the Afghan government, regardless of religious affiliation.

STRENGTH THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

**¶14.** (U) Like many politicians in Kabul, Balkhi believes that Afghanistan needs continued USG support in order to hold back its foreign enemies. In the meantime, he hopes that developing strong relationships between the various parts of the GOA is the key to future Afghan independence from the US.

Over the course of the meeting, Balkhi described three separate bilateral relationships as being crucial to the future development of the country: (1) the relationship between the Wolesi and Meshrano Jirgas in Parliament, (2) the relationship between Parliament and Karzai's government, and (3) individual MPs' relationships with their constituents, which he believes can help build grassroots trust in the central government. On this last point, Balkhi explained that USG-sponsored trainers should emphasize to future classes of MPs that they have a responsibility to the people who elected them, and that the Afghan people should be satisfied if their elected MPs observe and balance the government's actions.

PARLIAMENT - COMMITTEES ARE KEY, BUT STILL TOO EARLY FOR POLITICS

**¶15.** (U) When asked about the current state of early Parliamentary development, Balkhi explained that it is still too early to talk about forming political groups based on any sort of common ideology. Committees, however, can still be formed based on members' diverse professional experiences even as some members choose to remain politically neutral. Balkhi also pointed out that many people will confuse the role of committees and ministries because they do not understand the difference between recommending bodies (committees) and implementing bodies (ministries). This was another point that he felt USG-sponsored trainers should incorporate into further training sessions.

**¶16.** (U) Also on the subject of training, Balkhi believes that USG-funded trainers should have directed their orientation programming at separate groups of MPs, divided according to

prior levels of government experience and by education level. Classes on the basic structure and function of government, for example, were more necessary for MPs with little or no government experience, while long time national leaders like Rabbani or Mojaddedi hardly needed basic lessons. At one point, Balkhi criticized the fact that too many orientation trainers had been brought in from "third world countries" rather than developed democracies, although he later complemented the USG for incorporating Palestinian trainers.

COMMENT

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17. (SBU) In this first meeting with USG PolOffs, Balkhi refrained from talking too much about himself, although some of his professional history is known. As a newspaper publisher and owner in Kabul, Balkhi made a name for himself politically when he was selected by Qanooni to act as his running mate in the 2004 Presidential election. He seemed comfortable in expensive but traditional clothes, speaks Iranian Farsi, and loosened up considerably when conversation turned from social niceties to actual political business. Whether he leans toward the intellectual technocrats on future Parliamentary debates or towards his Shi'a mullah colleagues remains to be seen, but he is certainly a deep thinker who will make a good addition to the Wolesi Jirga.

END COMMENT.

NEUMANN